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Front Edit Other
Page Page Page

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Student Describes Bay Of Pigs Battle

Most young men between the ages of 14 and 16 are concerned about girls, a car of their own, and the latest singing rage. George del Valle was learning of hate and how to kill.

Early in 1959, shortly after Castro's victory in Cuba, the St. Gregory's College freshman was still living in his native land.

What was it like to be 14 and live under the Castro regime?

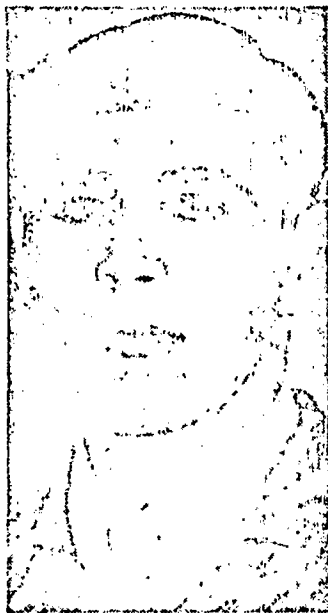
"One day my brother and I got a call," George del Valle recalls of those days, "to go to church and pick up my grandmother. Someone thought that there was going to be trouble.

"Outside the church there were about 100 military guys and when the people came out of the church they started calling them dirty names and making fun of the people. All of the young people started to fight them (the soldiers). Then they started firing their guns at us. I escaped, but many of the young people were jailed. One of my friends was shot in the head with a machine gun."

Two years later 16-year-old George del Valle was in Bethesda, Md., training under the direction of the U. S. Central Intelligence Agency. In April of 1961 he was flying supply missions to the invasion forces at the Bay of Pigs.

Before Castro's rise to power Fernando del Valle, George's father, was a major in the Cuban Air Force and the commander of the San Antonio Air Force Base. He also owned six cafeterias in Havana. Two months after the revolution he was dismissed from the military and shortly lost his business to the government.

Following the incident at the church in Havana, a number of Catholic youth organizations began plotting against the Castro government. "We planned to take the arms and go to the hills and fight," George del Valle said.



George del Valle

When government officials heard of the underground activities of the Catholic youths, they began to harass the families of the youths involved. The del Valle home was searched and officials kept watch on the movements of members of the family. On August 18, 1960, Fernando del Valle put his wife and three sons, Fernando, George and Roberto, aboard a commercial airliner bound for Miami, Fla. He left the country in October aboard a fishing boat.

Meanwhile, George del Valle had lied to officials about his age and had joined the Cuban refugee air force of the Frente Revolucionario Democrático (Revolutionary Democratic Front), which was financed by the CIA, and was in Guatemala training.

After two months in Guatemala, the 300-man air force detachment joined 1,500 Cuban refugee infantrymen at Happy Valle Base near Puerto Cabeza, Nicaragua, a former World War II U. S. Air Force Base. (Although the minimum age for the refugee forces was ostensibly 18, George del Valle said that about 500 members of the infantry force were younger than this.) The next

three weeks were spent in preparation for the now infamous Bay of Pigs invasion.

The five days from April 15 to April 19, 1961, are engraved in the memory of the St. Gregory's student.

The first action of the invasion came on Saturday, April 16, 1961. Six B-26 bombers, manned by Cuban refugee pilots, took off from Happy Valley to raid air bases in Cuba. The invasion had originally been scheduled for April 16, but was delayed for one day.

George del Valle saw his first action on April 17 as a bombardier of a C-54 transport plane with the mission of dropping supplies to the inva-

sion forces.

Six minutes away from Cuba the transport was attacked by two Cuban pilots flying English-built fighters. The C-54 was rescued by two U.S. Navy jet fighters, which were part of a Naval task force providing cover for the invasion and air drop.

As the transport approached its target area, George del Valle looked down on the battle from the open bomb bay doors. "The first thing I saw was a big fire caused by a napalm bomb. Then I saw eight or nine tanks moving towards our troops," he recalls, "and I started screaming at the pilot to sweep them with rockets."

"Then I heard a lot of shooting and when I looked down I saw five or six rows of bullets coming at us. I started shooting back with a hand gun. Then I heard the order to make the drop and I stopped shooting."

"When we turned to go home we found that the plane was hit and the number one engine had failed."

After the C-54 limped back to Happy Valley Base the crew learned the Cuban refugee forces had lost two of their six planes during the mission.

Although he was not assigned to a mission on April 18, George del Valle hid aboard one of the transports. "It was important that I go," he said. The second mission was rougher than the first.

The end of the war came at Happy Valley Base on Thursday, April 19. "They told us the invasion had failed. We cried."

In a few weeks George del Valle was back in Miami attending Coral Gable, high

school. Then in October, 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis blared across the headlines. Rumors spread among the Cubans in Miami that another invasion of the Island was pending. At the direction of the U.S. government, the young men joined the U.S. Army and began special training at Fort Knox, Ky. Then the crisis passed and so did the plans for the invasion. After six months, George del Valle was discharged.

While in the service the youth had obtained his high school diploma. He worked in Miami and Kansas City, Mo., until he had saved enough money for college. This fall he enrolled at St. Gregory's College in Shawnee, Okla., as a pre-engineer major. He plans to continue his education at Oklahoma University or Kansas University.

The rest of his family is still in Miami. His father is working in the circulation department of the Miami daily newspaper and attending night classes in order to obtain a draftsman certificate.

George del Valle, though not bitter, has strong opinions on why the Bay of Pigs invasion failed. "Most of it was because the plan was changed, he says. "We didn't have the right equipment and the full backing of the U.S. Air Force."

"It was like you pick up a hitch-hiker and only take him half-way to where he is going."